

## HOW DO WE PREPARE?

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**Text: Luke 1:46b–55**

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is the name. God's mercy is for those who hold respect from generation to generation. Strength has been shown; the proud have been scattered in the thoughts of their hearts. The powerful have been brought down from their thrones, and the lowly lifted up; the hungry have been filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty. God has helped us all, in remembrance of continued mercy, according to the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

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Every Monday Beth Hoffman Faeth and I sit down in our respective homes and have a conversation about the sermon from the day before. We record this and release it as a podcast called *In-Depth with Seth and Beth*.<sup>1</sup> In this short podcast, we often talk about the many and varied streams of thought and information that flow into the sermon—as well as what we must let go of. We often talk about how we prepare for whatever the text is calling us to say. Last week we talked a lot about preparation as we discussed Beth's excellent sermon in which she spoke about John the Baptizer preparing the way. I was caught by these words of hers: "We must humble ourselves to follow and to trust that even when our path appears a solitary trail to blaze there are encouragers, messengers, prophets who have prepared the way and created the opportunity to discover what it is we are really looking for. We just need to be courageous enough to take the next step, because we are also preparing the way for someone else." This also raised a question for me: "How do we prepare?" This question is poignant in this season of Advent as we are in waiting, preparing for the birth of a new hope in the world.

This question emerges again for me with the reading of today's scripture. This reading in Mary's own voice, often referred to as the *Magnificat*, is a traditional reading for this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Joy. When I have read it, when I hear it read aloud, I wonder about this Mary and how she prepared herself for the great unknown that she was being asked to hold and wait for. How did she prepare? Did she make lists on big yellow legal pads like my mother? Or talk about it aloud like my wife? Did she ruminate like my father does or sing to herself like my daughter? Did she make mental lists while cleaning like I do? How did she prepare?

We will never know, of course, because we only get snapshots into the story. Moments like this *Magnificat* are illuminating, though. Whether these were her words or not, the perception of Mary is that one way that she prepared was to give thanks. We hear her here not fretting or being self-congratulatory but rather giving thanks to the source of her blessedness, reminding the listener that all good things come from God and illuminating that we humans can embody God's love in the world.

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<sup>1</sup><https://plymouth.podbean.com/>

How do we prepare? Well, we prepare the best that we can based on what we know in the time of preparation. Mary only knew whatever she had seen or had been taught in her village. She knew that this was a blessed child and she was a blessed mother, but there is no way that she could prepare for who and what her son would become. As Dolly Parton powerfully asks in the song “Mary, Did You Know?”: “Mary, did you know your baby boy would one day walk on water?” (My thanks to Anne Seltz for making me aware of this song.)

We can only prepare as far as our current understandings allow us. The emperor philosopher Marcus Aurelius once wrote: “Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.”<sup>2</sup> While there is much truth in that, it is also true that the future will be bigger than our imaginations, and we will need tools we are not yet aware of. We can only really prepare for whatever possibilities may be real or imagined in the moment of preparation.

The other night this was brought to the forefront for my family. At 4:30 a.m. there was an explosion of broken glass. It sounded like a glass bomb had exploded; we felt it as much as we heard it. I leapt out of bed, grabbed the baseball bat that I have tucked away and raced down the stairs. I was convinced that something or someone had broken a window into our house. I got to the bottom of the stairs and saw that the kitchen window had been broken. Or that was what my brain saw because it was what I was expecting to see. Instead, the window was intact and I perceived the street light reflection as brokenness. I quickly scanned the house and saw nothing broken, nothing out of place, nothing disturbed at all. As my brain was processing this unexpected information (or lack of information), I realized I was standing in something wet and sticky. You see, my brother-in-law had made us some cherry liqueur from wild cherries that had been growing in their Saint Paul alley. He fermented it all summer and gave us a bottle with a good, strong stopper. Well, the fermentation had not stopped, and this bottle, stored in a cabinet with other bottles and glasses, had built up enough pressure to explode like a bomb. It sheared the tops off other bottles and flung the cabinet doors open. The glass was so pulverized that it was like grains of sand. Grains of sticky glass sand stuck to everything.

There is no amount of preparation that would have prepared me for this. My baseball bat was a useless tool, my imagination was insufficient. But due to this new experience and information, next time something like this happens, I will have an expanded view of what may be occurring. That is how preparation works. We can only prepare for what is in our experience or in the breadth of our imagination. We do our best with what we have and with what we know. And when new information presents itself, we fold it into our bank of knowledge.

What does it mean then, especially in Advent, to add onto our understanding of Mary the fact that she is also revered in Islam? Mary the mother of Isa (Jesus in Arabic) is the most talked about woman in the Muslim holy book, the Quran. She is the only woman mentioned by name in the entire Quran and has an entire Sura (chapter) devoted to her and named after her—Maryam. She is named in seven different chapters throughout the Quran and overall is mentioned much more in the Quran than the Bible. It is asked that all Muslims who speak the names of Maryam and her son the prophet Isa to follow their names with the honorific of Peace Be Upon Her/Him in the same fashion that they say it after the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). It is written in the Quran, “‘Behold,’ the angels told Mary, ‘God had chosen you, purified you, and given you distinction over all women.’”

What does it mean to our preparation in Advent to know that this central character in our Christian story is also superbly meaningful in our sibling religion of Islam? How does this knowledge, whether new or

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<sup>2</sup>Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*.

familiar, change and expand your understandings? How does this affect the ways in which you may prepare this Advent season? Of what do you need to let go?

Part of the work of preparation is letting go. We cannot prepare for every single eventuality, so we have to let go and do the best we can with what we have. We also need to let go of what we thought we previously knew. With the addition of new information, our understanding is expanded and our previous thinking may even begin to feel narrow. In preparation we may be asked to let go of previously held convictions, even ones that may have felt unchangeable.

This is a gift of being human. Our experiences and imaginations allow us to prepare for what might be coming next while also allowing us to be adaptable. So, how do we prepare? We do so by both addition and subtraction. We prepare by adding new information into our understanding—homemade cherry liqueur continues to ferment in its bottle, and our Muslim siblings talk about Mary even more than Christians do. We also prepare by letting go. We let go of what we once thought we knew—that broken glass in the middle of the night can only mean one dastardly thing or our Christian superiority and singularity when it comes to our revered stories.

We collectively have a lot to prepare for right now. At Plymouth we are in the season of preparation before Christmas and the reminder that hope is continually born anew. We are preparing to say goodbye to Paula and preparing to welcome our new minister, DeWayne. Nationally we are preparing for a new presidential administration and whatever will come next with a vaccine and this pandemic. We are needing to continue preparation about how to save our planet and all creation, for continued conversations about systemic racial inequity, about extreme economic unbalance, about lack of meaningful work and shelter. We are needing to prepare for a lot and do a lot. How do we prepare? We continue to learn, to expand, to grow while also being brave enough to let things go. We prepare by letting our souls magnify God like the exalted Mary says. We prepare by rooting ourselves in the abundance and desires of God.